

2

Toeing the Line: Schoolgirls

■
■
■

In algebra class, Lindsay Sutter sits toward the back of the room with her friend Suzy Maynard. Neither girl likes math, and they hope their physical distance from the teacher will give them some measure of anonymity, as well as the opportunity for a furtive chat. Lindsay is a slender, graceful girl with hips that she thinks of as fat rather than merely wide-set, and pale blond hair that reaches midway down her back. Her face is round and her eyes wide and blue; with her green T-shirt, faded jeans, and scuffed Keds, Lindsay would be the image of the 1960s California Girl except for a slight flatness at the tip of her nose. That and what one of her teachers called a "piercing intelligence": Lindsay is in the gifted program at Weston and on the advanced math track. Her seventh-grade history teacher describes her as a "dynamo," and this year, when a shy new student arrived from Mexico, it was Lindsay who was asked by her English teacher to mentor the girl, helping her to adapt both academically and socially to Weston.

Like Lindsay, Suzy is a gifted student. She has a head full of light brown curls, coffee-colored eyes, and a somewhat prim

expression. Suzy often laughs after she speaks—a nervous, high-pitched giggle—as if she’s trying to disassociate herself from her own ideas; when she isn’t talking, she looks down demurely.

The girls have scoped out their territory accurately: discipline is loose during most of the algebra lesson, and they quickly abandon their assignment, although they leave their books open in case the teacher looks their way. Since it’s the last week in October, they fall into a discussion about Halloween costumes. Suzy is planning to dress as a black cat; Lindsay says she’s going to be “a bunny,” adding, “Doesn’t that fit my personality?” They go on to talk about an English assignment, and, after a few guilty minutes devoted to their math lesson, drift into a conversation about their future career plans.

“I’d like to be an interior decorator or a teacher,” says Lindsay, who has also expressed interest in being a stay-at-home mom, like her own mother. “I like putting colors together and making them look right, but I think it might be kind of a waste. I want to help people, and I don’t know if it’s helping someone to tell them where the couch goes.”

“My parents would be proud if I were a surgeon,” says Suzy, who is an only child. “But it’s too gross—whenever I think about it I think about the shower scene in *Psycho*. . . . I think maybe a lawyer.”

Lindsay snorts at this notion, which she seems to view as ludicrous, and swings her hair over her shoulders. Suzy laughs, too, a little anxiously.

“I’m trying to imagine this sweet girl questioning someone on the witness stand,” Lindsay says, still laughing. “She’d be in a cold sweat.”

“It’s true,” Suzy says sheepishly. “I’m too cute to be a lawyer.”

“Yeah,” says Lindsay. “You’d be like: ‘Did you kill him?’

No? Oh, okay, sorry.’” She ducks her head shyly, still playing Suzy-the-lawyer, and pretends to turn and slink away.

“It might be interesting, though,” Suzy says, still trying to be taken seriously.

“Interesting?” Lindsay exclaims. “Well, that’s one way of putting it. You’d meet some characters, all right.”

Suzy capitulates and joins the game. “Yeah, all the guys you’d meet would be murderers. Can you imagine? ‘Hi, Mom, this is my husband—no, he didn’t do it.’” Both girls crack up.

As used by Lindsay and Suzy, “sweet” and “cute” are interchangeable with “deferential,” “polite,” or “passive.” They are code words for that time-honored notion of the good girl: the girl who is nice before she is anything else—before she is vigorous, bright, even before she is honest. As the girls talk, Suzy tries to put forth an alternative vision of herself, imagining all the opportunity her sharp intellect could provide, but in the end she betrays both her intelligence and her ability to agree with Lindsay: she is too cute to be competent. This in spite of the fact that law is now an acceptable field for bright women to enter. This in spite of the fact that Suzy’s own aunt is a judge.

■ Too Cute to Be Competent ■

The lessons of the hidden curriculum teach girls to value silence and compliance, to view those qualities as a virtue. In fact, students tend to believe that, although they pay more attention to boys, teachers actually like girls better: as one Weston girl once told me, ticking the list off on her fingers, “teachers like us because we’re nicer, quieter, and better behaved.”¹ And

the girls are right: teachers *are* more likely to describe girls as "ideal" pupils.² Yet since, in practice, educators reward assertiveness and aggression over docility, the very behavior that is prized in girls becomes an obstacle to their success. Furthermore, the praise girls earn for their exemplary passivity discourages them from experimenting with the more active, risk-taking learning styles that would serve them better in the long run.³ As the author of one study put it, by adolescence, girls have learned to get along, while boys have learned to get ahead.⁴

Girls like Lindsay and Suzy are the biggest losers: gifted girls, who best combine tractability with superior performance, receive less attention from their teachers, and often their talents are overlooked entirely. When Liz Muney, who directs the gifted program in the Weston school district, reviewed her files in the late 1980s, she discovered that boys were referred to her twice as often as girls for special testing, precisely because giftedness is seen as aberrant, and girls strive to conform. Since she alerted teachers to her findings, she says, the ratio in the district has improved.

Although they're ignored in the classroom, smart girls are singled out by their peers for stigmatization.⁵ Asked directly, most of the girls at Weston will say that it is acceptable for a girl to excel, to get good grades. Yet behind their backs, girls like Lindsay and Suzy are referred to as "schoolgirls," an insult so great that, once tipped off, I never revealed the title of this book. The social pressure, Liz Muney says, has prompted innumerable Weston girls to repudiate their intelligence (as well as their self-esteem) and drop out of the district's gifted program.

As they proceed through school—and, in the case of Lindsay and Suzy, as they consider career options—gifted girls who remain academically engaged must negotiate between the independence necessary to fulfill their potential and the compliance which, although expected of them, is in direct conflict with

standing out and shining bright. The task is daunting: how can they, after all, be both selfless and selfish, silent and outspoken, cooperative and competitive?

In their extensive work on girls' psychological development conducted in two private all-girls schools, psychologists Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan found that, confounded by this irresolvable dilemma, their subjects invented a superior self who could solve it—"the perfect girl": "the girl who has no bad thoughts or feelings, the kind of person everyone wants to be with . . . [it is] the girl who speaks quietly, calmly, who is always nice and kind, never mean or bossy."⁶ The "perfect girl" acts as an imaginary companion and a constant reproach. She reminds young women to silence themselves rather than speak their true feelings, which they come to consider "stupid," "selfish," "rude," or just plain irrelevant. To achieve the ideal that this exemplary creature represents, Brown and Gilligan's girls believed they must suppress the unruly self, with all of its nasty opinions and rebellious feelings; as Carolyn Heilbrun has written, they believed they must sacrifice "truth on the altar of niceness."⁷

In her relentless selflessness, the "perfect girl" is painfully reminiscent of the Victorian "angel in the house," the woman who, through saintlike virtue, conquers personal desire and lives only to enhance the lives of others. In that era, if women unleashed anger or rebelliousness they were deemed monsters; they were shut away, depicted, like Bertha in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, as the "madwoman in the attic."⁸ Such renunciation of self inevitably caused ill health: the nineteenth century saw an upswing of emotional "hysteria" in upper-class women, as well as an epidemic of "fasting girls," who willfully refused food, sometimes unto death.⁹

But today's "perfect girl" doesn't just bludgeon young women into a bland silence: she wreaks havoc on their academic

self-image as well. Girls like Lindsay and Suzy believe that, in addition to being perfectly nice, they must be perfectly smart. In his study of the effects of gender, race, and class on self-esteem, psychologist Charles L. Richman found that high-achieving white girls in particular are subject to unrealistic standards of success. When they fell short, they overgeneralized failures with an intense self-punitiveness; by late adolescence, their self-esteem had spiraled downward.¹⁰

■
"Good Enough" Isn't
■

Lindsay, especially, is in the grip of what writer Louise Bogan has called "the knife of the perfectionist attitude."¹¹ In conversation, she moves her neatly manicured hands nervously; sometimes they tremble, ever so slightly. I once asked her what she'd change to make her life happier, more relaxed: she said that she'd move to the country, where she'd be near more trees, and "no matter what I did, I'd get perfect grades every time, straight A's. It seems like no matter how hard I try, I'm always doing something wrong." During another conversation she said, "I pressure myself to do perfect; I can make myself sick doing it. I don't like to get below a B. If I'm honest, I don't like to get below an A. I just feel like I failed."

Lindsay's vision of excellence is so unattainable that she's left herself little room to maneuver, and little leeway for positive self-esteem. Like the girls in Richman's study, she inevitably falls short of her ideal and becomes self-recriminating. To hide her imagined flaws, she withdraws from taking risks and has developed a low threshold for humiliation, especially in math class,

where she is slowly losing ground. "In math, I just keep my hand down because I'm always afraid," she explains. "The two times I raised my hand last year I made these stupid mistakes like nine plus nine is sixteen, that was one. It was embarrassing; everybody else would be getting it and then I'd be making these stupid, stupid mistakes. So I just stopped raising my hand."

Lindsay does not, however, fear risk when it is appropriate to her vision of femininity; in fact, where expressing affection is concerned, Lindsay is downright aggressive. When the bell rings for lunch, it takes Lindsay about ten minutes to walk the fifty feet from her locker to the schoolyard. Every few steps, she sees someone she knows—a girlfriend, a younger boy, someone from her church youth group—and she breaks off in mid-sentence to run toward them, flinging her arms around them and hugging them as if they're newly released hostages. Sometimes her friends respond in kind, sometimes they look a little startled. Mostly they hug back, a bit less exuberantly, and shrug. "Lindsay just attacks," Suzy explains, watching her friend engulf a tiny sixth-grade boy.

Yet it is in this display, and what immediately follows, that the cost of braiding the ideal girl with the ideal student becomes disturbingly clear. In between the emotional reunions with her friends—which reaffirm her essential "sweetness"—Lindsay pulls from her locker the brown-bag meal her mother has packed for her. She holds it in her right hand and extends her arm into the hallway behind her as if she is holding something foul; she doesn't even turn her head. One of her friends walks by and grabs the bag, laughing.

"What has Lindsay's mom made me today?" she asks.

Lindsay explains that she doesn't eat her lunch because she is too nervous. "I'm such an uptight person," she says. "I'm so worried about doing perfect in all my classes and everything